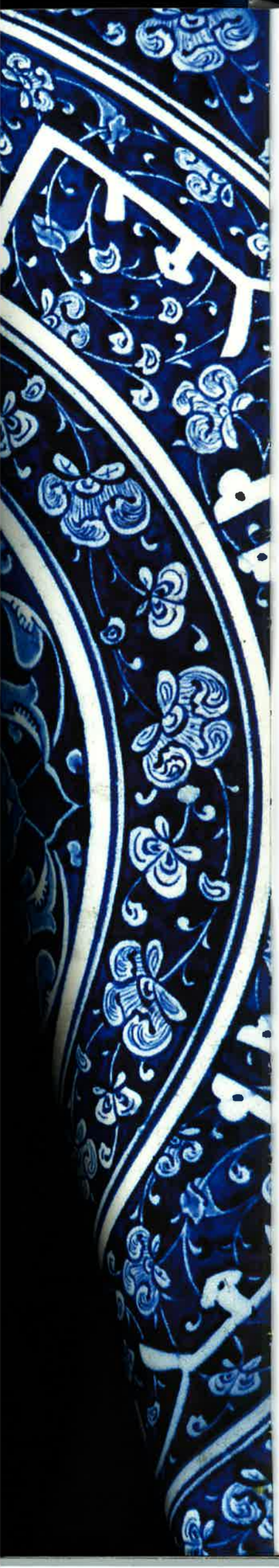
Walter B. Denny

Iznik

The Artistry of Ottoman Ceramics

Thames & Hudson



The Beginnings of Ottoman Ceramic Art at Iznik

"In nine places [in Iznik] there are workshops of the masters of ceramics.
In the time of Sultan Ahmed I [1603–1617] there were three hundred of these...."
From the *Seyahatnâme* of Evliya Çelebi (1648)

The sleepy rural town of Iznik in northwestern Turkey, still surrounded by the remnants of massive 5th-century Byzantine walls, is chiefly known in the West as old Nicaea, the site of the great Church Council of the year 325 from which emerged the Nicene Creed. But Iznik has another identity in the history of art, as the seat of production in the late 15th through the late 17th centuries of the famous Iznik ceramics, which are among the most renowned artistic products of Ottoman culture. Today Iznik tiles, tablewares, and other ceramic products command extraordinary prices on the art market and are exhibited in the collections of most of the world's great museums. But in addition to their great beauty, the underglaze-painted ceramics of Iznik also hold the key to our understanding of the emergence of the new Ottoman court style in Istanbul in the 16th century.

Throughout the later 14th and earlier 15th centuries Iznik, with its nearby deposits of potter's clay and its proximity to the forests of Bithynia as a source of firewood fuel for ceramic kilns, appears to have been the site of a production of rather ordinary reddish-bodied pottery wares with a distinctive repertoire of designs that enjoyed a wide distribution throughout Asia Minor. Indeed, the excavation of numerous shards of such wares at classical Miletus near the Mediterranean Sea resulted in the name "Miletus-ware" being assigned in earlier scholarly literature to such Iznik products. The discovery in the mid-20th century of the "Miletus-ware" kilns, replete with wasters, in Iznik itself later brought about the reattribution of these works to Iznik. It also confirmed that Iznik had a pre-existing tradition of ceramic production before the emergence there in the late 15th century of the production of high-quality ceramic wares under court influence or control. Ironically, the Iznik kilns that produced the great ceramics of the second half of the 16th century, mentioned in countless documents, have not yet been found, despite considerable archaeological effort.

With the possible exception of carpets and silk textiles, probably no medium in the history of art traveled as widely or as frequently over such long distances as did ceramics. In ancient times the humble but ubiquitous unglazed Greek *amphorae* and *pithoi* were the equivalent of today's barrels, storage crates, and shipping containers, and were widely dispersed around the Mediterranean, as evidenced in the shipwrecks discovered by underwater archaeologists in recent times. On an entirely different level, the elegant and expensive high-art Chinese porcelains produced from the 13th century onward and exported west into the Islamic world by sea, and more rarely along the so-called Silk

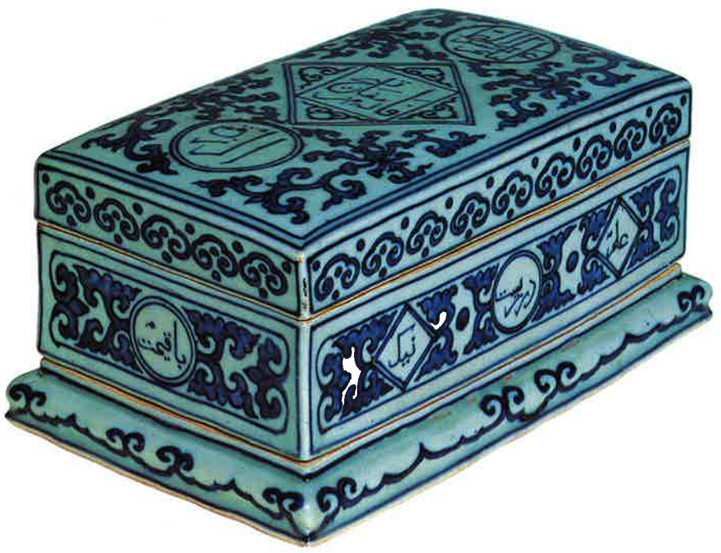
Opposite:
Large plate in the Baba Nakkaş style,
ca. *1480–1510. Diam.: 40 cm (15 3/4 in.).*
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Right:
Fragment of "Miletus-ware," 15th century.
Private collection.

Road, were luxury products of great beauty and rarity, the results of a secret high-temperature technology using secret ingredients. Their perilous journey westward was prompted by an immense demand in Islamic courts, whose miniature paintings from the late 14th century onward depict them as prized possessions of rulers. Recognizing this fashion in the Middle East, the Chinese began to produce blue-and-white porcelain specifically for export to the Islamic world, even manufacturing pieces in traditional Islamic shapes, or items decorated with Islamic inscriptions in the Arabic language (see below).

What was this Chinese porcelain that was so sought after by Muslim elites? The word *porcelain* is a French version of the Italian term *porcellana*—literally "little pig"—used as a name for the pearly white cowry seashell, which the ceramic ware resembled in color and texture. Chinese porcelain was composed of two chief ingredients: a white silicaceous clay known as *kaolin*, and a pulverized feldspar-like mineral known as *petuntse*, which, fired at a very high temperature, produced a hard, white, heat-resistant porcelain body. As mentioned, apparently for reasons of taste, the majority of examples of early Chinese porcelain making their way to the Middle East were decorated with designs painted in blue on a white ground. (Strangely, the cobalt used for the blue decoration usually came itself from the Middle East and traveled eastward to China before making the return trip in finished ceramics.) But the core of the mystique of porcelain lay not in its colors or decoration, but in its body material. Silicaceous clay, a form of clay composed either of fractured igneous rock or the skeletons of diatoms, is the major material used worldwide to make pottery. When dampened it makes a doughy material that can be formed into shapes on the potter's wheel or by using molds. After being dried, the "raw" ceramic can be fired in an oven, causing it to harden permanently, thus producing pottery, an art form found for millennia in many sedentary cultures. In terms of quality, the higher the proportion of silica found in the clay, the stronger and whiter the body. In their search to produce ever stronger and whiter wares, medieval Islamic potters in Syria and Iran began to add extra ingredients, such as ground-up quartz or a manufactured sandlike glassy material called frit, to their potter's clay.

True porcelain is the product of kilns capable of sustaining temperatures in the range of 1280–1400 degrees Celsius for a period of several hours. But the high temperature alone is not the only requirement for the making of porcelain. It was the "secret" ingredient of petuntse, not discovered outside of China until the early 18th century by Johann Friedrich Böttger at Meissen, that allows the body material to vitrify—that is, to turn into a solid glasslike material. These two ingredients, fired at the requisite temperature, produce a product with a fused, almost pure white translucent glasslike body that is extremely hard and able to resist very high temperatures. When tapped lightly with a wooden mallet, it produces a clear, almost bell-like tone. Because of its great strength, it can be made into wares of great delicacy of shape and with minimal thickness. And it can be painted with designs in a variety of colors, which are subsequently sealed under a thin transparent glaze; this painting on white ceramic is a process closely analogous to the ancient Chinese tradition of brush painting with ink on white paper, making the transferral of ideas from one medium to the other very easy.



Left:
Pen-case with inscriptions in Arabic and Persian. Ming porcelain, 1506–1521. Musée National des Arts Asiatiques, Guimet, Paris.

Opposite:
Ceramic vessel in the form of a mosque lamp, ca. *1515. Height: 33.2 cm (13 1/8 in.). Musée du Louvre, Paris.*

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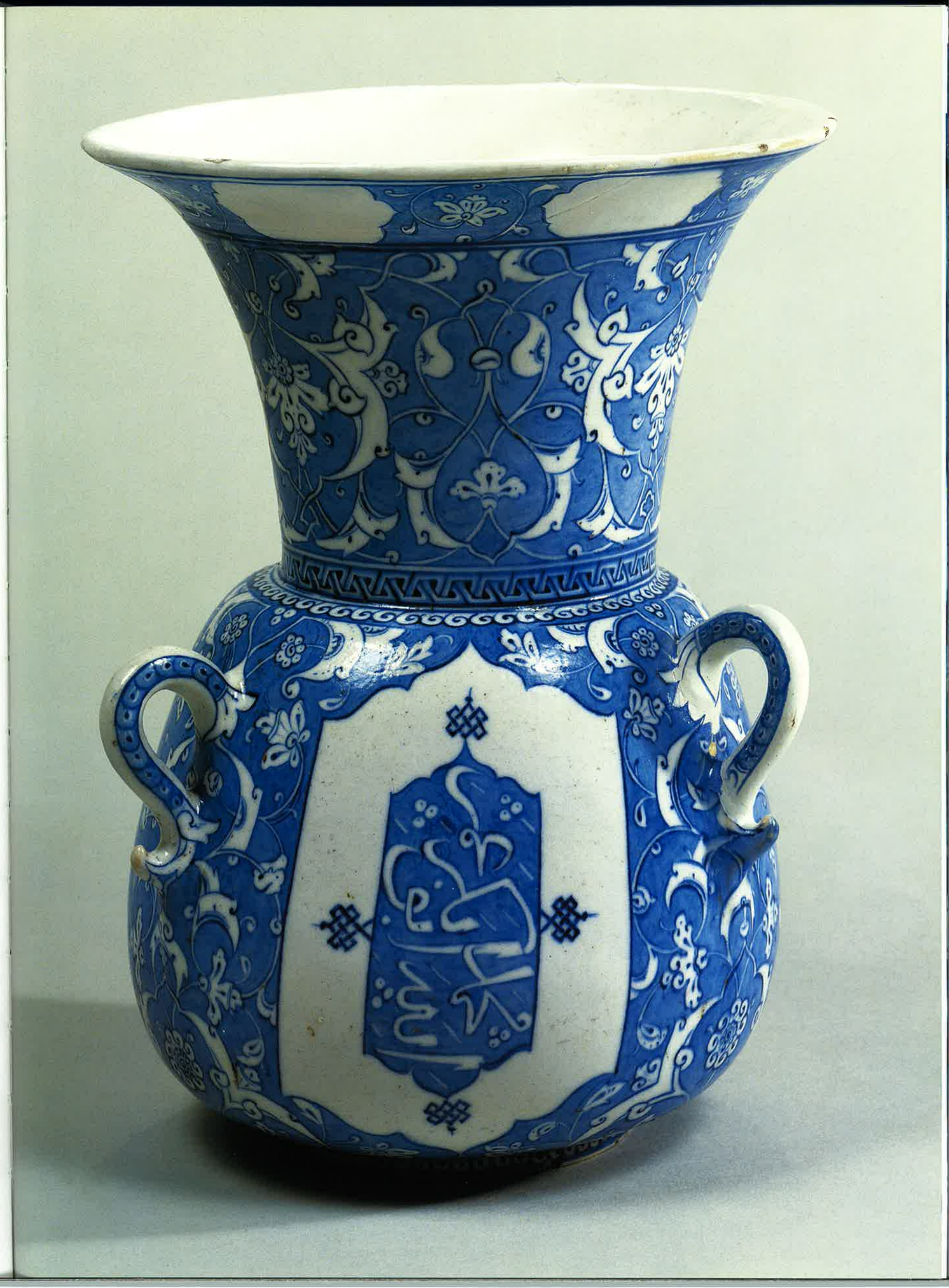
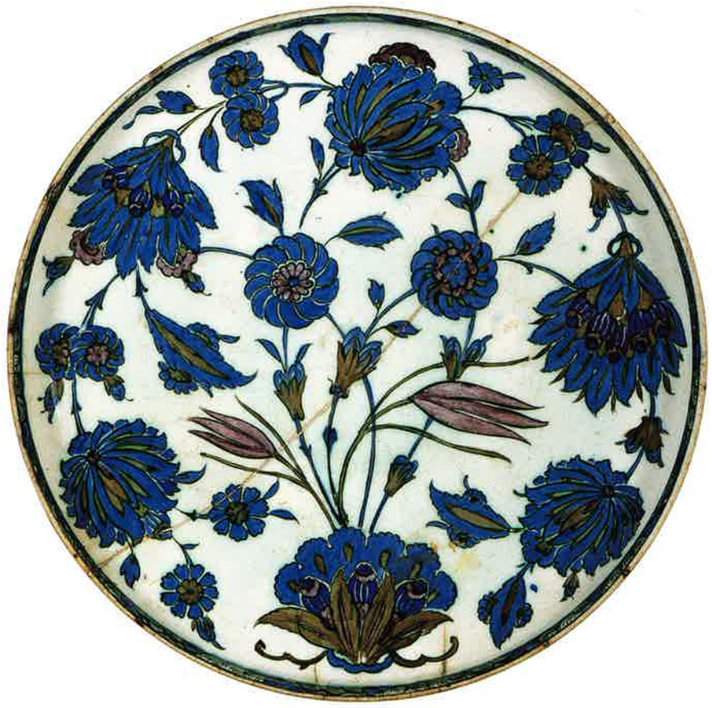
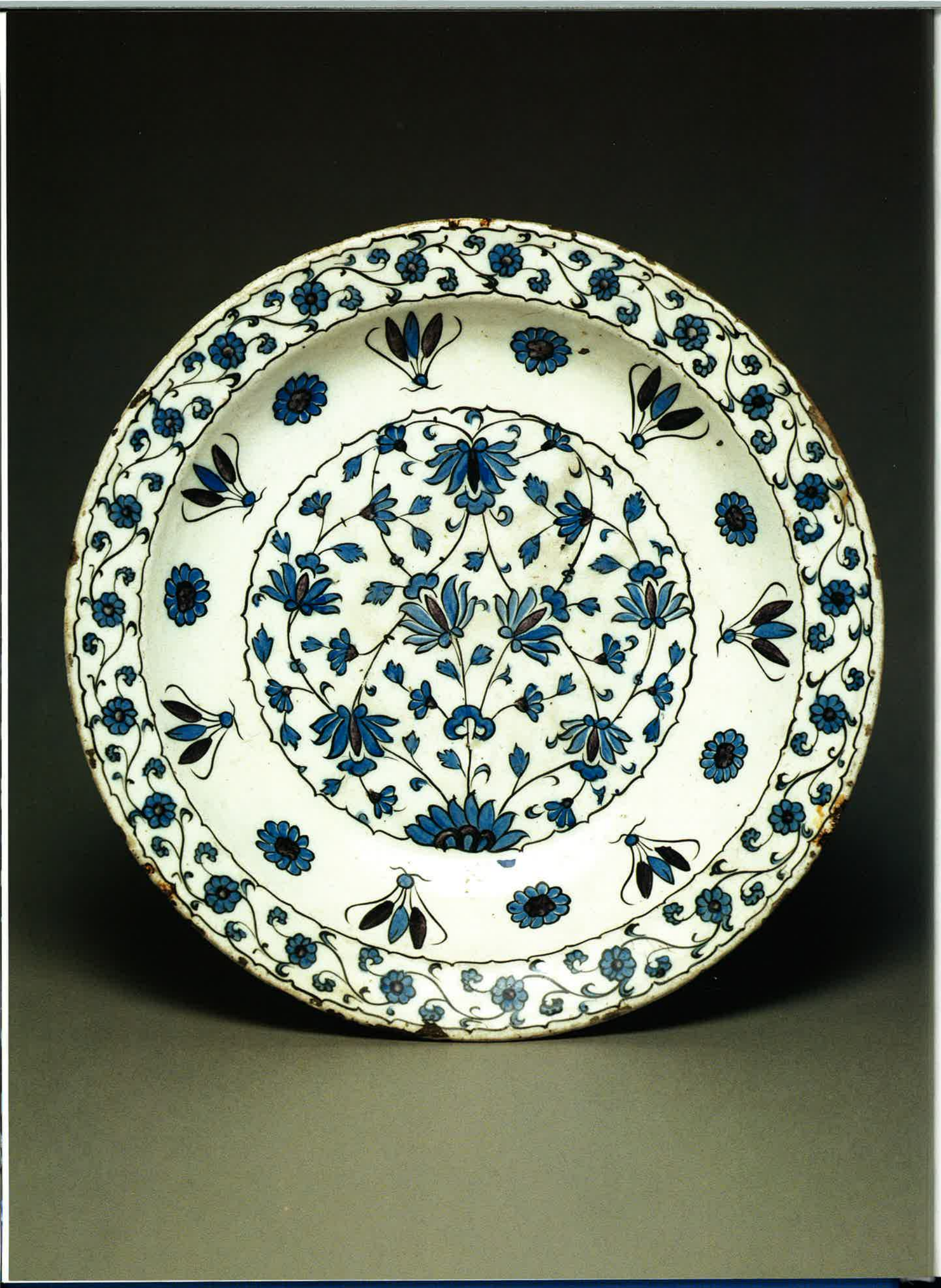




Above:
Rimless plate, ca. *1545–1550.*
Diam.: 31 cm (12 1/4 in.).
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Opposite:
Plate with motif of saz-style leaves,
ca. *1545. Diam.: 37.2 cm (14 3/4 in.).*
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



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Opposite:
Large plate with stylized flo
in the Ming style, ca. *1520.*
Diam.: 57 cm (22 1/2 in.).
Musée Adrien Dubouché, Lim

Right:
Plate with foliate rim, ca. *15*
Diam.: 31.9 cm (12 3/8 in.).
Musée National de la Renaissa

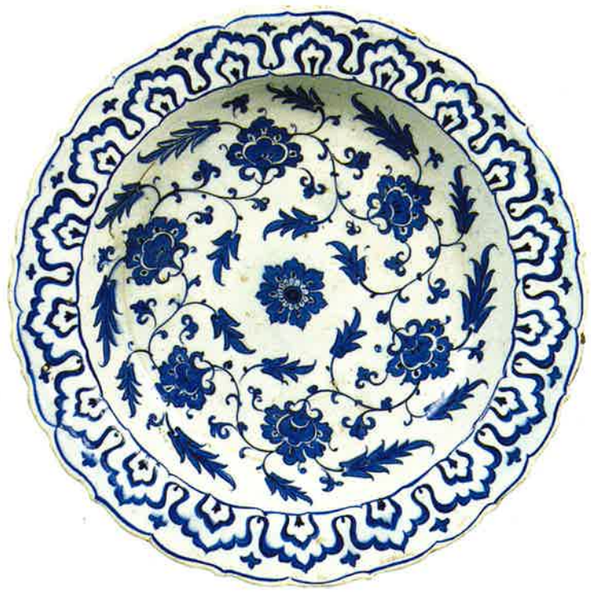
The search for a porcelain-like ceramic also took place in the Islamic world, but due to the absence of petuntse, true porcelain did not come to the Middle East until modern times. Nevertheless, by the 12th century Islamic potters in Persia, by combining clay with various ingredients, had produced a very strong white body material that in many respects resembled Chinese porcelain. Although many different names have been applied to this type of ceramic in the Islamic world and in Europe, today the preferred name in English for this mixture of potter's clay, ground-up quartz, and glassy frit, is *fritware*. When this near-white body material was covered with a thin coating of pure white material known as slip (French: *engobe*), it bore a striking visual resemblance to porcelain, even if it lacked the translucency and ringing tone when struck. Blue-and-white fritware that either imitated Chinese porcelain or was strongly influenced by it was made in Iran under Timurid and Türkmen patrons in the 15th century, and around the same time was also produced under Mamluk patronage in Syria. Rather rough-hewn blue-and-white wares of poor quality were also produced in many other places around the Islamic world in the early to mid-15th century, including İznik. However, it was only at the end of the century that a major change occurred, transforming Iznik from a center of production of cheap and rather ordinary pottery into a major center for the production of ceramics of superb technical quality and extraordinary artistry.

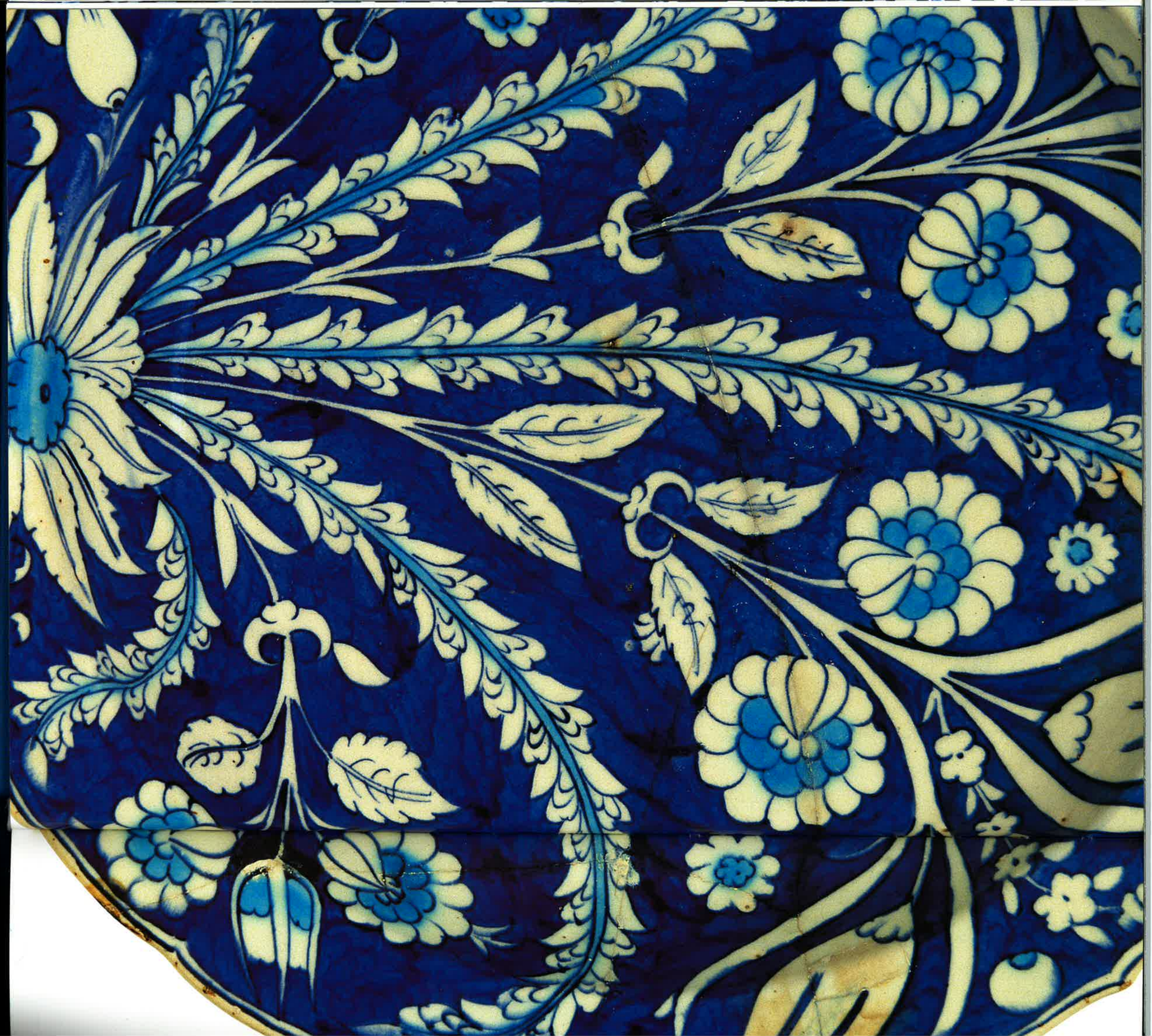
The new technique that was to bring Iznik fame and fortune is the form of ceramic decoration known as underglaze-painting. In this technique, which is essentially the same as that of porcelain, but which was adapted to the artificial white body material or fritware developed in Iznik, the creation of a piece of tableware proceeds in several stages. First the potter's clay is mixed with ground-up flint (*yüre*) and glassy, sandlike frit, and with water. The doughlike material is then thrown—shaped—on a potter's wheel. The resulting piece of pottery, now a light gray in color, is then dried. Preparatory to its decoration the now dry vessel is covered with a thin coat of pure white slip that makes it appear more porcelain-like, and is then dried again. The decoration is then painted on the white slip.

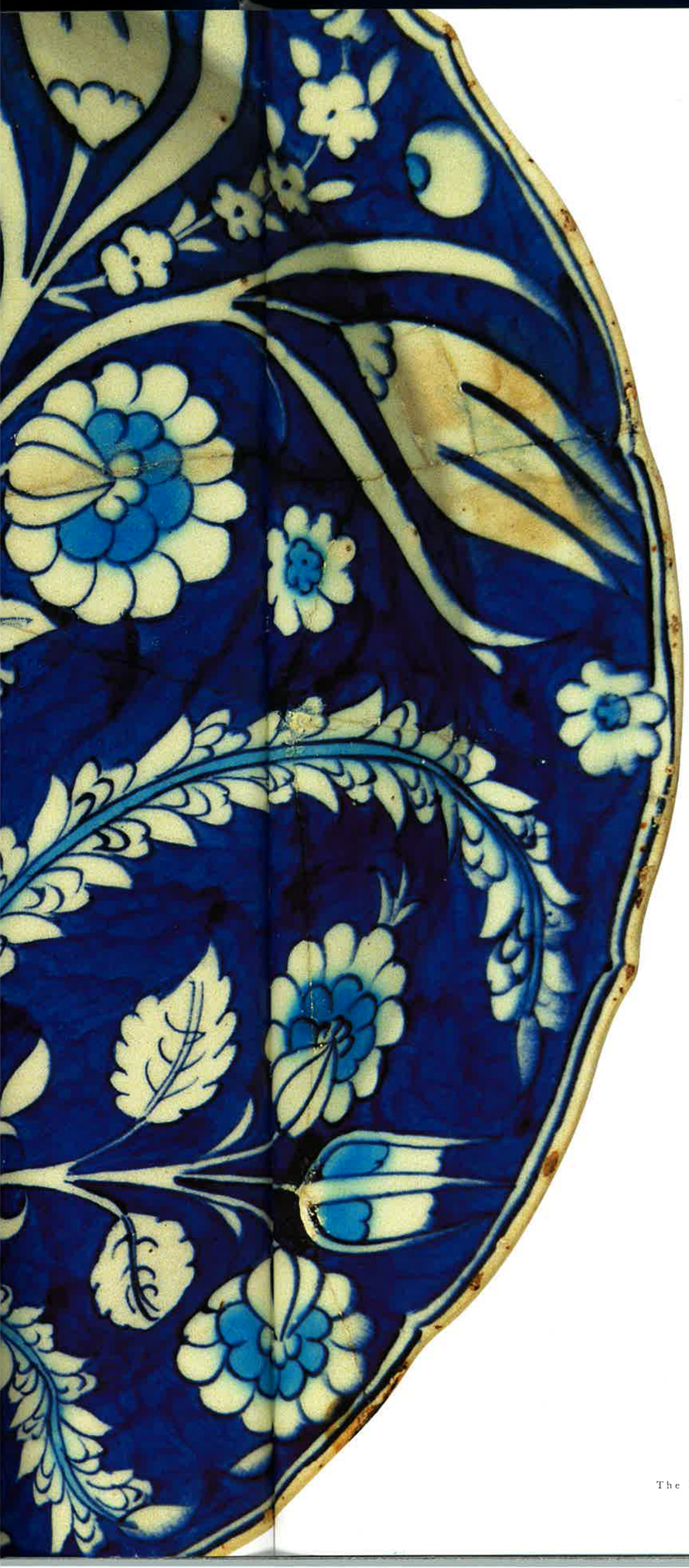
In the earliest Iznik wares, the decoration consisted of one color: cobalt blue. This color could be used in a dark and opaque form, or thinned like an ink wash to produce a translucent light blue over the slip, and was suitable both for lines (dark and opaque) and colored areas (either dark or light). When cobalt blue colors are initially applied they are usually a dirty brown in color, the gorgeous blue itself only emerging after the vessel is fired in the kiln. Gradually the range of colors increased. By the second quarter of the 16th century, a translucent turquoise, used for colored areas but almost never for lines, was added to the repertoire. Before 1550 a dramatic new discovery was made—a chrome-based black pigment that could be used to make very thin, precise lines in a design strikingly similar to a manuscript illuminator's ink. In addition to blue and turquoise for colored areas, the Iznik potters developed two other colors—a pale, thin purple based on manganese, and a grayish green. The small number of surviving wares

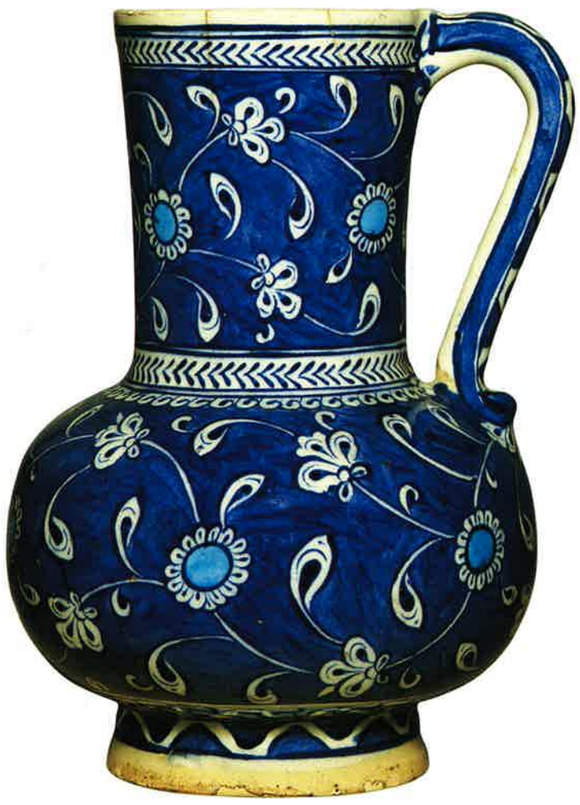
Opposite:
Large plate with stylized floral motif in the Ming style, ca. *1520.*
Diam.: 57 cm (22 1/2 in.).
Musée Adrien Dubouché, Limoges.

Right:
Plate with foliate rim, ca. *1550–1560.*
Diam.: 31.9 cm (12 5/8 in.).
Musée National de la Renaissance, Écouen.









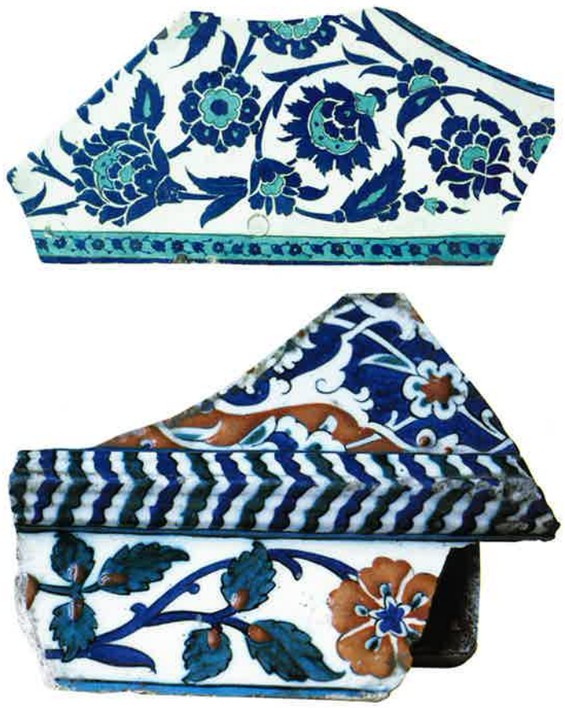
Left:
Plate with foliate rim, ca. *1550–1555.*
Diam.: 37 cm (14 5/8 in.).
Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.

Above:
Ewer, ca. *1530.*
Height: 17.5 cm (7 in.).
Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.

(there are virtually no tiles in this color scheme) from this period of experimentation are among the greatest masterpieces of Iznik production, demonstrating the direct participation of artists trained in pen and paper in the process of making ceramic wares. Around the same time, Iznik artists experimented with the development of colored slips—claylike coatings in pale blue or milky pink—that could be used for a basic ground color instead of the ubiquitous white. A third and final developmental phase of the underglaze-painting technique at Iznik occurred after 1555. First a true red, formed from blobs of thick sliplike pigment, was developed. Finally, by the late 1560s, the most difficult color of all, a translucent emerald green related to the earlier turquoise, was perfected.

The decoration in various colors having been painted on the slip-covered vessel, the third step in the making of a piece of Iznik ware involved covering the painted decoration with a coating of glaze. This consisted of glassy material, including frit, combined with lead, which served

Below:
(top) Sherd with turquoise and blue decoration, 1535–1545.
(bottom) Underglaze-painted sherd, 1580–1590.
Musée National de la Céramique, Sèvres.



Opposite:
Ceramic with a translucent emerald green ground, ca. *1575.*
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

as a flux, allowing the glaze to melt in the firing process and cover the entire vessel with a thin, shiny, and transparent coating, which in apposition to the various colors caused them to develop the full intensity of their various hues. The resulting piece of Iznik ware could bear an astonishingly close resemblance to Ming porcelain, it could be a masterpiece reflecting the finest draftsmanship of the court design atelier, or it could be a colorful evocation of garden flowers, intended to be exported to Europe or sold in the bazaar. By 1600 Iznik wares were exported and esteemed over much of the Middle East and Europe.

This late 15th-century change in technique and style was to transform the sleepy provincial town of Iznik into a great center for ceramic manufacture, which came quickly into being in the late 15th century, flourished through the 16th, and then shortly before 1600 suffered the first effects of a precipitate decline that by Evliya's time, fifty years later, had transformed it into a kind of ghost town. Today we surmise that the combined effects of catastrophic fires in the potters' quarter, the cumulative and adverse health effects of breathing silica dust from the body and lead vapors from the glazes, the endemic malaria of Iznik's lake basin, and a profound change in the Ottoman economy resulting in a collapse in the value of the basic monetary unit—the small silver coin known as an *akça*—all combined to bring the final glorious period of Iznik polychrome production—essentially only about four decades from 1560 to 1600—to a gradual and aesthetically negligible end by the late 17th century.

Below left:
Footed bowl with coral ground,
ca. *1550–1565. Height: 12.9 cm (5 in.).*
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Below right and opposite:
Plate with blue ground, ca. *1535–1560.*
Diam.: 30.5 cm (12 in.).
Musée National de la Renaissance, Écouen.

Overleaf, left:
Plate with small white flowers,
ca. *1545–1550.*
Diam.: 36 cm (14 $^{1}/_{8}$ in.).
Musée National de la Renaissance, Écouen.

Overleaf, right:
Plate with foliate rim, ca. *1535–1540.*
Diam.: 39.5 cm (15 $^{1}/_{2}$ in.).
Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon.